

ADWEEK

With a Social-First Mind-Set, Esurance Completely Dominated the Twitter Super Bowl

1.5 billion impressions, but will new customers follow?

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February 8, 2016, 6:08 PM EST



Esurance was huge on Twitter during the Big Game. *Esurance*

Esurance proved that a less expensive pregame Super Bowl ad can actually create more buzz than an in-game spot, which cost \$5 million per 30 seconds. What's more, the brand chiefly leaned on Twitter—not Facebook—to accomplish its feat.

With the exception of #SB50 and #SuperBowl, the brand's #esurancesweepstakes hashtag was seen more than any other combination of words in Twitter conversations on Sunday evening, said Nancy Abraham, vp of integrated marketing communications for the San Francisco company. She said Twitter supplied her with that information Monday.

"And if you count retweets, we're No. 2 only behind #SB50," Abraham added. "There was no other [consumer] brand on that list."

Her company has been tweeted about 2.92 million times since its 30-second spot ran prior to this year's Big Game. The #esurancesweepstakes hashtag, in particular, has been tweeted 2.48 million times, which Abraham and her team said helped generate 1.5 billion media impressions.

In 2014, Esurance ran a postgame Super Bowl ad in conjunction with a \$1.5 million, winner-take-all giveaway. This year, it's giving away \$50,000 to numerous lucky participants as well as a \$250,000 grand prize. More importantly, it started the campaign in the days leading up to the Super Bowl, when its pregame ad paid dividends throughout the whole game. At one point, the brand was averaging 9,000 tweets every minute. Two years ago, its Big Game campaign was designed as a surprise.

"[This year], we didn't want it to be just about watching the TV commercial and the Super Bowl," Abraham said. "We needed a participation mechanism, and for us, it was the sweepstakes and Twitter."

She added, "Of course, the \$250,000 helped a lot as well."

Marketers question the actual impact of sweepstakes

But can a money giveaway actually bring in new customers?

"When you do something like this, you are going to get a lot of people who are doing it for the money—you always anticipate that and expect that," Abraham said. "But what you hope to do is get people to think about Esurance and get to know Esurance. So when they do go to get car insurance, they think, 'Hey, what was that cool brand that did that thing? ... I am going to check them out.'"

But branding experts' reactions to Esurance's sweepstakes effort were mixed.

"It's not going to build committed customers," said Scott Maney, chief creative officer at Breakaway. "An enormous percentage of the [2.9 million tweets] they're touting are people interested in the money, not the product. They'll have a very short memory."

But others disagreed. "A sweepstake will just end up being viewed as added value and a little fun to a category that can use it," said Robert Passikoff, president of Brand Keys.

"I don't think the campaign cheapens the brand at all," said Toni Box, senior director of social media and content services at PM Digital. "They simply took advantage of millions of viewers who most likely had a mobile phone in their hand, already tweeting about the big event. So they made it incredibly easy for viewers to enter the sweepstakes while also ramping up awareness for the brand."

Crystal Spence, senior consultant at Vivaldi Partners Group, said this form of "brand engagement really comes into play if the marketing team is prepared to follow up with content or offers that resonate for less superficial reasons shortly thereafter."

To that end, it appears Abraham and her team are on the case. For instance, they've been informing several winners throughout the day today and posting videos on social channels.

"You can keep that momentum going," she said. "That's why we tweeted at the end of last night that while the game isn't going into overtime, we are."